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Venezuela Sanctions Highlight US Hypocrisy on Human Rights

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OPINION



Venezuela sanctions highlight US hypocrisy on human

Obama should follow his example on Cuba and engage with, not punish, Venezuela

December 18, 2014 2:00AM ET

by [Lauren Carasik](#)

On Wednesday, President Barack Obama announced a prisoner swap with Cuba, plans to normalize diplomatic relations and an easing of financial and travel restrictions against Havana. The U.S. embargo, which has lasted for more than a half century, is widely unpopular in Latin America and has been criticized by the international community. Obama [said](#) that the ongoing isolation of Cuba was an impediment to his foreign policy in the region and that the thawing of relations would promote “the emergence of a democratic, prosperous and stable” country. Sens. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., and Marco Rubio, R-Fla., [predictably denounced the move](#), with the latter vowing to try to block any change.

Obama’s actions on Cuba, however welcome, stand in stark contrast to efforts to impose sanctions on Venezuelan leaders. On Dec. 10, the U.S. Congress passed the [Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act](#), imposing sanctions on a number of Venezuelan leaders for human rights abuses committed against anti-government protesters earlier this year. The White House has [signaled that](#) Obama will sign the bill. “We have not and will not remain silent in the face of Venezuelan government actions that violate human rights and fundamental freedoms and deviate from well-established democratic norms,” Obama’s press secretary, John Earnest, said in a statement on Dec. 11.

The bill, which was approved after a failed attempt last May, freezes assets and denies or revokes visas for designated leaders. The protests, which began in February, resulted in 43 deaths and hundreds of injuries and arrests. [Among the dead](#) were members of the state security forces and both supporters and opponents of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro’s socialist government. Despite the widely accepted and facile media narrative about the government’s culpability for the origins of the protests and the ensuing violence, there is [convincing evidence](#) that Venezuela’s right-wing antagonists bear much of the blame.

Washington’s antipathy toward Venezuela is not new. Since Venezuela’s election of leftist leader Hugo Chávez in 1998, the U.S. government has routinely sought to undermine Venezuela’s democratically elected government. Washington supported a failed coup attempt in 2002 against Chávez. But U.S. efforts to discredit the Venezuelan government did not end there. Washington [continues to](#)

spend millions to support the opposition in Venezuela and undermine the government through NGOs such as the National Endowment for Democracy.

The sanctions bill affirms that the U.S. seeks “a mutually beneficial relationship with Venezuela based on respect for human rights and the rule of law and a functional and productive relationship on issues of public security.” It appears, however, to be premised more on Washington’s resentment of the leftward shift of some Latin American countries and growing regional cooperation and independence than on concern for the rights of protesters. Latin America is increasingly moving [out of the sphere of U.S. influence](#), rejecting its economic and political dictates.

“ Washington’s punitive stance toward Venezuela, while giving its own architects of torture a free pass, underscores the United States’ long-standing double standard on accountability. ”

Cuban-American lawmakers led the charge to single out Venezuela. “We in the United States have an obligation to shine a bright spotlight on Venezuela’s abuses and must object to the severe human rights violations committed by the Maduro government and his paramilitary thugs,” said Menendez, who co-sponsored the bill. Rubio, also a bill co-sponsor, disparaged Venezuela’s socialist economy and lauded the sanctions in a statement after the House passed the bill. “With these sanctions, we can end the days of Venezuelan regime officials and thugs repressing innocent Venezuelans in their day jobs and then coming to Florida to live in the lap of luxury and splurge Venezuela’s wealth,” [he said](#).

A year ago, Secretary of State John Kerry announced the [end of the Monroe Doctrine](#), the principle issued in 1823 by President James Monroe that the Americas would be under U.S. protection from interference by European powers. The U.S. relied on the doctrine to justify nearly two centuries of its own intervention in the rest of the hemisphere. “It will require courage and a willingness to change, but above all, it will require a higher and deeper level of cooperation between us, all of us together as equal partners in this hemisphere,” Kerry said at the time.

The U.S. has been slow to recognize the regional diplomatic preference for a mediated solution to Venezuela’s crisis, though. [Many Latin American countries did not support sanctions](#) when first floated by U.S. lawmakers in March and seem unlikely to embrace them now. As a result, the latest sanctions will [further erode U.S. influence](#) in the region. And if the U.S. wants to advance the will of the Venezuelan people, the current bill misses its mark. [Polls](#) show that the majority of Venezuelans oppose sanctions on the nation’s officials. Among those averse to punitive measures are members of the Venezuelan opposition who fear that Washington’s efforts to demonize government leaders will serve only to strengthen their position, uniting the citizenry against outside interference.

Selective attention

Washington’s focus on human rights abuses in Venezuela is in stark contrast to its aid to Honduras, Mexico and Colombia, [which face grave human rights](#) situations. For example, the number of casualties in Venezuela from the protests pale compared with the mounting death toll in Honduras, which is widely known as the world’s murder hot spot. In [preliminary observations](#) earlier this month, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which promotes human rights in the hemisphere, denounced the climate of violence and impunity in Honduras. In May more than 100 members of Congress [urged the State Department](#) to carefully assess its compliance with the 2014 State and Foreign Operations Appropriations Act and the Leahy Law, which bar assistance to state security forces that commit gross human rights abuses. But the Obama administration has not heeded those admonitions.

Similarly, the disappearance of 43 students in Mexico has drawn renewed attention to the country’s [rampant human rights](#) abuses, including those perpetrated by or with the complicity of the Mexican government, which the U.S. supported with nearly [\\$3 billion in military aid through the Mérida Initiative](#) and other bilateral programs since 2008. Colombia, another U.S. ally, also boasts an [abysmal](#) human rights record, but the country has received more than [\\$8 billion in U.S. military and police assistance](#) since 2000. Yet instead of imposing sanctions on these countries and its leaders, the U.S. continues to extend tens of millions of dollars in security aid.

Congress passed the Venezuela sanctions bill a day after the Senate Intelligence Committee released the summary of its report on the Central Intelligence Agency’s torture and detention program. Despite its graphic content, Obama has not wavered in his refusal to pursue a full reckoning for the abuses documented in the report, insisting on leaving that shameful chapter in the past. Washington’s

punitive stance toward Venezuela, while giving its own architects of torture a free pass, underscores the United States' long-standing double standard on accountability. Similarly, sanctioning Venezuela while providing cash and security assistance to countries whose governments are implicated in human rights abuses, further exemplifies the United States' selective respect for human rights. Obama should follow his example on Cuba and engage with, not punish, Venezuela.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.



Latin America celebrates new US-Cuba era